

FACTSHEET

Plant Protection & Quarantine

United States
Department of
Agriculture

Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

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Endangered Plants

The vast diversity of the world's plant life is currently disappearing at a faster rate than new species are being discovered and recorded. In the United States, more species of plants are in danger of becoming extinct than the combined number of species of birds, fish, mammals, insects, and other creatures considered endangered. Although environmental changes like increased industrialization pose the greatest risk to wild flora, certain types of plants need their wild stocks protected from the world's market demand for them. Many plants have substantial commercial value as collectors' items or are popular as decoration. Others, such as trees, are desirable for the products made from them. Certain plants are even traded for their medicinal value.

Unfortunately, the wanton collection of valuable plants from their natural habitats has compromised many wild plant populations. Mahogany and rosewood trees, American ginseng, Mexican living rocks, saguaro cacti, pitcher plants, Madonna lilies, bread palm cycads, Texas wild-rice, and lady slipper orchids are all examples of plant species that have become endangered in this century because commercial trade practices have depleted their wild stocks.

International Protection of Endangered Species

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is a comprehensive wildlife conservation treaty signed by 135 countries. Initiated by the United States in 1977, this international agreement regulates the commercial trade of endangered species and monitors the trade of species that are at risk of becoming endangered. Participating governments issue permits authorizing certain plants, other wildlife, and products made from them to be commercially traded from one country to another. These countries are held accountable for adhering to CITES provisions and for ensuring that endangered species are not illegally imported or exported. Without such a system of controls, scientists estimate that more than one-fifth of the millions of species of wild

flora and fauna presently living on Earth will become extinct over the next 30 years.

In the three appendices to CITES, all orchids and cacti, many types of cycads, aloes, agaves, tropical trees, insectivorous plants, bulbs, and medicinal plants are classified based on varying levels of protection. Some endangered species, listed in Appendix I, are so close to extinction that CITES permits are generally not issued to move any as wild-collected plants from their country of origin for commercial purposes. (Permits for commercial use can be issued if a particular Appendix I plant has been artificially propagated.) If a species is listed in Appendices II or III, U.S. regulations require that the country of origin supply traders with the proper CITES export permits or certificates of artificial propagation before wild-collected species are sent to another country.

U.S. CITES Enforcement

The Department of the Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), as the U.S. CITES management authority, is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the treaty within the United States. FWS issues permits and enforces the animal provisions of CITES.

Working closely with FWS, the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) enforces the plant provisions of CITES. APHIS' Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) officers inspect all plants imported into the United States through APHIS plant inspection stations to ensure that no foreign plant pests or diseases enter the United States. These 16 stations are special quarantine facilities at which APHIS officers inspect, refuse entry or reexport, seize, treat, or release plants being imported or exported. In 1995, about 18 million of the total 465 million plants inspected at these stations were endangered species. Approximately 3 million plants protected by CITES were legally exported from the United States in the same year.

If endangered plants arrive at an APHIS plant inspection station without the appropriate CITES documents or the plants do not match the documentation accompanying them, the plants will be seized

immediately. APHIS then obtains legal ownership through forfeiture proceedings. APHIS notifies FWS of all seized plants protected by CITES, and FWS distributes these plants to designated “rescue centers” throughout the United States. CITES officials of the countries from which the seized plants originated are notified of their placement in a rescue center, and officials from that country may arrange at their expense for the return of those plants. In 1995, more than 17,500 plants from several hundred shipments were seized and placed in rescue centers.

Securing Necessary Permits

Importing CITES-protected plants into the United States requires several documents from various government agencies. All permit arrangements should be made as far in advance as possible. APHIS inspectors cannot make last-minute arrangements to allow endangered plants into or out of the United States without the necessary documents from FWS and the wildlife management authorities of other countries.

Permits that may be required include the following:

- Export permits from the wildlife permit office of the country of origin.
- Import permits for Appendix I material from the FWS Federal Wildlife Permit Office.
- Import permits from APHIS for plant health requirements. All plants imported for growing or propagation must meet plant health permit and quarantine requirements.
- A general permit from APHIS for commercial shipments of CITES-regulated plants.

If there is ever any doubt about whether CITES requirements apply, APHIS recommends that individuals and businesses ask questions in advance rather than risk facing confiscation and possible legal penalties. To verify plant permit requirements and to secure the proper forms, labels, and instructions, contact:

Permit Unit
Plant Protection and Quarantine
USDA-APHIS
4700 River Road, Unit 136
Riverdale, MD 20737-1236
301-734-8645
Telefax 301-734-5786

or

Federal Wildlife Permit Office
U.S. Department of the Interior
4401 North Fairfax Drive
Arlington, VA 22203
1-800-358-2104 or 703-358-2095
Telefax 703-358-2281

APHIS charges fees for some permits, certificates, and inspection and quarantine services.

Travelers Alert

Although certain personal items that travelers may carry from one country to another are exempt from CITES requirements, the exemptions vary by country. When in a foreign country, travelers should contact their embassy to clarify any questions about these requirements. Travelers can also contact FWS and ask for the CITES managing authority in the country they intend to visit. These managing authorities are the best places to get answers to questions about requirements in foreign countries. As stated earlier, in the United States, the managing authority is FWS.

Buyers Beware

Despite international efforts to enforce CITES, some plant species are in danger of becoming extinct because of illegal trade through laundering, poaching, smuggling, and improper documentation. For example, smugglers have attempted to falsify propagation papers for Appendix I plants that actually were collected from the wild or to hide endangered plants in baggage when returning from international travel.

The United States is the world's largest consumer of wildlife and their products, followed by Japan and Western Europe. Consumers can assist international efforts to protect wildlife by becoming better informed. Reducing demand for wild-collected endangered plants is a critical part of efforts to sustain wild flora populations. However, many plants listed in Appendix I are artificially propagated and are available for purchase from reputable nurseries and other botanical sources. The effort to reduce demand does not mean that no one can have or grow these exotic, often rare plants.

The following tips can help preserve wild plants:

- While traveling, refrain from picking, digging up, or buying plants or plant products that may be endangered without checking first with the proper authorities.
 - Always buy plants from reputable sources.
- Remember that most cycads and all orchids and cacti are endangered species.

Contact APHIS or FWS if you need information on CITES requirements.